

I Am Above Sea Level

by Keeley Young

Linus

It's cold where I am, because I won't put on a shirt.
There are plenty in the closet, mind you. The one I bought for myself when I was last in town, for instance, is hanging onto the chipped wood of its hanger. I stared at it this morning. Maybe I don't want fabric on this skin.
I went online the other evening, while I was lying in bed naked, and I searched for a place that would help me grow the hair on my chest. It is looking awfully splotchy, like a toddler's painting of a shirtless man.
I think my neighbour must think I have a sick obsession with pornography.
But I can't tell him that when he overhears the moaning and the screaming it isn't actually me watching it, consuming it, but my cousin who partially lives with me.
He is a little hard of hearing, sometimes, although I never go to the doctor's appointments with him. I listen to him, and I plug into far-too-expensive earphones when he masturbates.
I am alone in the mornings until 3pm, and on weekends.
I am shirtless, holding a coffee mug in the shape of a walrus.
When I glance out the window above the toilet, while I piss, I bare all my teeth at my neighbour. Yes, hello.
It's just me.

Jennie

My therapist doesn't get to hear about my strange neighbour, but my father does. He has dementia.

The retirement village he lives in was where he was married for the third time, although he does not remember that now. All of his wives are dead.

I scrub the toilet with a yellowy detergent I bought from the store around the corner. It still smells terrible, despite the advice that maybe over time it will improve, like living in between an enlarged ashtray and the place where every neighbour swings their plastic ribbons of dog poop in an unclassy game of cornhole.

The yellow is cheap, so is the toilet. The house was not.

When I go to therapy, I talk quite predominately about anything that steers me away from talking about how my father is doing. You don't want to see a grown woman cry, I think, when my therapist cocks her head in quick-response to something I have just said.

I remember a kid I used to babysit in my early 20s.

He had curly hair, too curly, his parents could never seem to convince him to go to the barbers down the street. He was convinced, I think, that he could never have curls again.

They invited me to his high school graduation and I sat in a plastic chair in the back of the auditorium picking at my fingernails. I barely recognised him when he walked on stage.

Saskia

Sometimes a patient will request a video-call appointment, and you stare around in the background of their apartment, house, what-have-you, and do your best to not fall into that trap of psycho-analysing their furnishings.

Which sounds far too clichéd, but do you think I can avoid being a cliché sometimes when I spend so much of my time doing the best I can with my job?

I am in the background of a video call with family that lives overseas, in Canada.

My mother is awkwardly adjusting the position.

Briefly, you see a too-close shot of her nostrils, a glance up them. It is almost like she is toppling off the barstool, and the phone, its camera, are her chance at saving herself. She just needs to cling on.

Gabi, my sister, cannot stop laughing.

I think it must be her husband in the background, making a racket.

They have two children, both adopted.

Mike, he bought a green screen for some fake hospital photos. They look absolutely terrible, a mishmash of skin tones and of course he had to be wearing a shirt with green on it, which washed out most of the potential for it to look, well, not staged.

My aunt, who loves Toronto more than any other place in the world, calls my name like a warning. This is my fifth video call of the afternoon; you would be tired too.

I want to meet your new roommate, she says, rambling about her next visit here.

In my twenties, I'd lived with my sister.

Never thought she would marry, given the men she dated.

Mike

I feel uncomfortable at church.

The first time I went was with an aunt when I was twelve. It could have been earlier, I don't know, but I remember this time. My parents didn't care about God.

My aunt doesn't say parts out loud, like her belief that this anti-credence was cause for their deaths. She's deranged in the head. I see her at Christmas.

We go to church with the kids, although I reassure them in the car that no religion is definitely theirs until they decide for themselves. No lock-in contracts. It isn't so bleak.

Instead of driving home immediately after work, I stay parked by the office.

I could light up a cigarette.

I haven't smoked since I was nineteen, though.

For a vacation down south, before the kids were born, I downloaded a handful of random mobile games out of boredom. I kept them around, dangling, waiting for play when the kids want to snatch my phone out of my hands. I stare at the screen of colour.

Bored.

In church with my aunt, she taught me the hymns we sung.

I was quiet, but not silent, listening to the grating pitch of my own voice.

Linus

It's just me.

The house to myself for an evening, and I feel dreadfully alone.

The thing they do not mention about being single, and vulnerable, is how difficult it can be to invent a reason for someone to hold you.

The text message I received from my cousin this morning:

You should invite over that one man you met last year, in the sauna.

Remember him?

Instead I sit on the couch with the curtains drawn closed and I make use of the lube Shawn bought me for my birthday, which was four weeks ago.

Yesterday morning I called out to my neighbour when I was wheeling the bins down to the curb, and she at first pretended not to notice the sound of her name.

We had a lovely little chat about noise levels.

I threw my arms in the air, as if surrendering, and flashed a picture of Shawn on the screen of my phone. He's attractive, she might have said, if I had not just informed her he's a serial masturbator that now is collecting girlfriends like stamps, or Olympic green-and-gold coins.

At midnight, I walk to the refrigerator, pour myself a glass of lactose-free milk, and cry.

Jennie

I barely recognised him when he walked on stage.
He must be in his late sixties by now, dressed completely in black, gripping a microphone.
One of his concerts was the first time I almost got trampled to death by passion, by passionate people. Nowadays it is mostly during protests and rallies. If you do not keep yourself at the same pace as everyone else, you break an ankle.
I like his music about the same as I did when I first saw him—very little.
My best friend, a high school buddy I see twice a year, would have lost her virginity to his music. She invites me to all of his concerts, and I stare at the clock first, as if it is some indication that my life is getting shorter and shorter by the minute hand.
My neighbour is hosing his car.
I have a thick hangover.
While I ran out to grab another bottle of orange juice, amongst other things, I looked at the DVD section of the grocery store for something for my father to watch.
I feel like I am still his cheeky daughter if I sneak in a movie for him to play, even though he never remembers any of them.
I was mouthing along to the few lyrics I do remember, from his most famous songs.
My best friend, Mikayla, had been wearing his face on her shirt all evening.
At the concert, I told myself I should look for somewhere else to live.
Closer to him.

Saskia

Never thought she would marry, given the men she dated, although there was the brief period of time my parents were convinced she would marry a stuffed crocodile she named Fergus. I believe she won the crocodile from a regional fair, and it smelled like popcorn for months. One of my patients is running late and I am drinking another tea, my third for the day. Off in the distance a crack of lightning burns a split in the sky, and when the car crunches along the gravel drive, I see a glimpse of him drenched in rain before he even knocks on the door. He has depression. It grows worse with every day, he says, fidgeting with the pocket of his pants. They have zips. I hesitate sometimes, to tell my patients that I am a proud lesbian woman who came out to her parents when she was studying in university, dreaming to help people. I loved the school guidance counsellor, which is the wrong phrasing, for sure. She was a comfort, when I stressed over exams, over boys, over the impeding financial strain our family would go through once my mother had lost her job. Most of the family became quite religious because of it. I sought the guidance of the counsellor. You remember, I'm sure, the way it felt to receive an exam paper back with a grade that would have made you weep, had you been in your bedroom instead of the classroom. Had you been in enclosed space, a little laundry room, a broom closet. Instead of enclosing my patient's name, I'll call him Fergus, like the crocodile. Fergus the man stands next to his car for a few minutes, getting drenched in the rain. I think about joining in.

Mike

I was quiet, but not silent, listening to the grating pitch of my own voice.

Finally he pauses the rewind-and-rewind speech and stares at me. I assume I'm supposed to give my opinion, before he tells me how disappointing it all is.

I was in university, before I met Gabi.

There was still so much anticipation, or less pressure. I did actually want to be a high school teacher back then. I was probably less bored, too.

A family friend, Lee, was himself a teacher and was giving me notes on a speech I would be delivering in a few weeks. He was always so uncomfortable to be around. I think, probably, because I saw the way he treated his wife.

My aunt once whispered into my ear that she had fancied Lee in school, when he 'looked more like a badass'.

He never seemed like much of a badass to me. Just an ass, and bad.

I try to imagine how I would apologise for my sins in confession, if his sins were mine.

Gabi comes over, kisses me on the neck from behind, and tells me our youngest is tired.

Family events are punctuated with snoozing little children, wanting their father's shoulder.

Gabi says it's important, to her mother, to stay an extra few hours.

Linus

I pour myself a glass of lactose-free milk, and cry.
My cousin was in a serious car accident and is now back living with his parents.
I never see my neighbour anymore.
My salty, salty tears poison the glass of milk. I am still trying to convince myself he isn't dying,
although I spent a definite few days thinking the car accident had broken his legs.
It only broke his arm, which actually makes me laugh, and cackle.
I called a hair growth place about my chest hair, but I chickened out waiting to be taken off
hold. Someone will laugh at me. Someone will laugh because I want more chest on my hair.
Hair on my chest.
There is an unnatural tumulus of tissues here, there, by the bedside, next to the bin by the
toilet. I am tired. I am so, so horny. I am crying, and crying.
I have to clean up the tear marks on my face and get in the car and go vote for whoever will be
the next politician for the area, not that I care at all, or will be around too much longer to
worry.
I'm not going to kill myself!
I could always get hit by a car myself, though.
I suppose my neighbour is moving out.

Jennie

Closer to him, now, I listen to his heart thump in his chest.
My father sometimes forgets who I am.
I cherish the moments he knows this face, calls me George without hesitation.
I never took it as some cruel reminder that he wanted a boy.
He never treated me like he was ashamed I wasn't.
We are watching *Phone Booth* and it is strangely so comfortable.
The sore throat I had lasted longer than a week, and it still lingers around in my throat,
suffocating me when I know I have barely touched the water bottle I have almost tied to me like
a keychain.
One of my coworkers is a forty-something man from Northern Ireland, who's divorced.
He asked me if I wanted to go for a drink sometime after work, it doesn't have to be like that, I
notice you're not as talkative as you used to be, is all.
He's lovely.
In my tiny new flat, I scroll through an online magazine of coffins for my father.
It's a real pity there is no 'express delivery' button burning into the back of my retinas.
Of course I'm not being serious. I'm going to lose my father soon.
Mikayla tries to get me to go back to my therapist.
I don't have the money for that anymore.

Saskia

I think about joining in.

My sister, her husband, and their kids are swimming in the pool, and I am standing out of the way, half-shaded by an oversized umbrella. I have forgotten sunscreen, so if my patients notice anything stop-sign-red about my skin...I don't have much of a story, no.

Mike is doing better for the kids, I think.

When we were kids, Gabi and I, one of the kids in the grade below us drowned on a school field trip. Scarring stuff, but neither of us had been there to witness it, or the initial reaction to it all. I had come down with chicken pox. Gabi didn't leave my side—she insisted on screeching out whenever I went to scratch myself. You don't want scars, do you? Silly sister. Behave.

Aunt Valerie arrives by plane in a week.

She used to ask me why I had not yet found myself a husband. She is the sort of older woman to deny a truth no matter how many times you reiterate.

She has been introduced to my 'roommate' countless times.

Sometimes I think about whether Amy and I would take unsettling, faux-portraits of ourselves in stock-image hospitals, cooing at our children. Amy wants to give birth.

Do you think I made the right decision waiting this long to have children?

Mike

Stay an extra few hours, I say, before taking another puff of the cigarette.
I am nineteen, naked under the covers, in bed with a woman that won't be my wife.
Who's Gabi, I would have said.
She doesn't stay. I showered, threw on something old, with holes in the socks, and called an old buddy to come furniture shopping with me. I was already living out of home then.
I had this roommate that was already going bald, but you couldn't tell him.
I am waiting in the carpark outside my daughter's school.
I see her beautiful little face as she toddles towards me, skip, hop, jumping.
The opportunity to be baptised as an adult was presented to me when my wife was six months pregnant with our eldest kid, and I chickened out.
This is what I told her.
A bare lie, with my wife by my side claiming she would never force the baptism. It would fracture our marriage, would it not?
I think about how unscathed my forehead is.
Hasn't been cracked open yet, despite how much fooling around happened when I was a teenager, play-wrestling with my brothers, I mean.
The few years I played rugby.
The injury I sustained in the pool at the place we lived in from when I was ten until I was fifteen. Lovely place. Bit dangerous. The window that overlooked part of the roof.

Heddee'm

Overhead the three suns give me unique scars on my skin:
Meterra, the largest of the suns, burns a violet colour that washes off in the streams.
Kemea, the smallest, leaves white dots on my aquamarine skin. I cannot rub these off.
I hear my name called out in clicks of the tongue.
Oxam briefly interrupts and disturbs me, and I am shaken from every thought.
I just find them so breedable. Oh, no, did I say that out loud, during anti-season?
Forgive me.
The sun the same size as our own planet is called Yelkiy and it only serves to darken me.
My ancestors all went to their last isolations five tones darker than they were when they were birthed. I so admire that.
No one should be out on the surface for longer than three cycles of the suns at a time.
That suits me well.
I have found a bungalow for myself, a nest carved out of the walls.
It is not so cold and uninviting when I am not alone in it.
There was an important notice streamed into our consciousnesses while we dreamt pretty little dreams of flying aortesaxias and repeating images of a gamaneis gnawing on the feet of our handcrafted tables. I was only half-listening.

Oxam

Hi my name is Oxam.

I am non-binary and I was born with every set of reproductive organs that our species could possess. I am common, or at least no one gasps when I pull down my vermilion overalls.

I try not to do that too often, only during season when I am supposed to mate.

During the last season I felt a strong twinge I have never felt before.

I was growing comfortably closer to the fellow I was bedding, and it made me pause, and reflect. Which is a complicated set of feelings for a Polyaxiaad like me.

I distribute my trash into the large, overhead suction tubes. Everything must be sorted.

I am sane this way.

Not so much thinking about that vague new experience, of wanting to...

Snuggle up to the fellow?

Spend long, long nights in each other's arms, discussing mainstream things, like taxes?

My parents were indeed briefly in a unison of sorts, but it did not last.

My mother absorbed my father.

I had thought, they must have all their trash sorted and organised perfectly.

The way her mouth became a vacuum of time and space.

Jia Mooa

I teach the youngsters how to read our language.

One day I will birth a descendant of my own, but I am in no hurry.

Yyha-Meel, a student in my class, presents me with a gift while the other children are fast asleep. It is meditation time, and this child with the egg-shaped head is disobeying my commands, but I can forgive them.

The present is wrapped in yellow-and-black wrapping paper and smells vaguely of what I ate for breakfast this morning. Yyha-Meel nods her little head, and I violently shake the gift.

We both listen to the sound of cracking.

We are overjoyous, enraptured, our ears burn a vibrant white, and I can ignore something that has been bugging me for a few cycles of the suns.

Things should not bug me; I am not an insect (although we have started to learn about those.)

When all the children are in deep meditation, I wander off to the rear of the room, pressing a bare palm against the clay. It is ice-cold this time of year. I am at peace.

I find it difficult to see myself as something other than an educator.

That is the role I was dictated when I was in meditations of my own, as a child.

You teach, and you teach, and I do frequently converge with the parents of the children in the halls, and we say polite remarks to one another, and they of course know I am a tutor.

Yyha-Meel's mother once knocked the stack of ancient texts out of my arms, but it was of course an accident, and nothing was damaged except perhaps her delicate toes.

Wihja

There is still the scar on my stomach from when I visited the neighbouring planet, Cavesta. I was exploring the planet unaccompanied. I do not remember being terrified of my surroundings. Cavesta reminds me an awful lot of home, except everyone can comfortably walk around on the surface without all the chemical poisoning and errkia maulings. So terrifying, the errkia maulings. The scar, I tell my children, all nine of them, is from giving birth to the third eldest. They wear it like a badge of pride. I was on Cavesta for, I suppose what I am learning is called a vacation. One evening during slumber I was informed we would all need to report immediately, upon waking from our dreamscapes, to the science and research building. I love those lectures. A mingling of bodies and voices. I was on Cavesta to expose my third child to an alternate culture. They were in my womb, gnawing at everything nutrient I digested. Isn't it a miracle to be blessed to have so many children? I was on Cavesta because I am frightened for the future of my planet. The air is difficult to breathe on the surface, and once, as a child myself, I had learned all about the ecosystem of the planet. How important it all is, for science and research.

Heddee'm

I was only half-listening.
A towering, brawny figure loomed in front of me, warning me. I was not supposed to be heading above to the surface this soon again. I resigned.
But the curiosity!
I so desperately want to learn more about the world above, where my ancestors once lived.
In bed in the evening, I find the old aofebound journal I keep for note-taking and start to write a series of events, unfortunate and great, and terrible.
It feels, now, gross and unsentimental to keep a tally of the times I've ogled Oxam.
Instead, I would prefer to write in languishing prose how I anticipate we might react to one another during the next season.
How our bodies would brush against one another, completely in the nude.
I am supposed to label these feelings as *being horny*.
This morning I was ushered into a small room I had never seen before.
Which is not surprising. I am not allowed into the Science and Research Hall much.
They stood me in front of a mirror twice my height and I was forced to ogle my own body.
I do not look like Oxam.
I look positively ugly. Hideous.
This must be how other people feel. Downtrodden.

Oxam

The way her mouth became a vacuum of time and space—I was impressed.
In one of the lecture halls they were showing us a motion picture they called *The Devil Wears Prada*. The actress on screen was speaking to me, but I was not always recognising every word. A few rows in front of me was the fellow I had once thought I was falling in love with, but... I am not so certain anymore.
I think he might just be a Nate to me.
I think it makes little sense that my mother swallowed whole my father.
Small children remember things incorrectly, make tiny mistakes, have strange perception.
There is a chance I will be much, much older than this, and think that my mother broiled my father on the tethacta-cooker and fed him to the children as a form of nutrients.
It would not be that absurd.
In my small unit, I have fashioned a hammock out of various items that were for sale from the belongings of a neighbour, I suppose, who had passed on into his isolation.
He had been a collector of things, it seems.
This reminds me of the gazes I seem to collect, purely by walking around and existing as myself.
I was told as a young thing that I would not be treated strangely or differently for possessing both male and female genitalia. It is normal for our species.
Romantic attention, it must be. Out of season.
I wonder how Andy would have reacted to having both instruments.

Jia Mooa

Nothing was damaged except perhaps her delicate toes.
We were in a practice room, in the rear of the Science and Research Hall.
I had never seen a contraption like this before, and I had become too obsessive with it.
My supervisor sharply informed me I was to be slower, because when there were real ingredients, and various amenities we would need, such as toothbrushes, the contraption would become quite heavy indeed.
I have never cooked a meal for myself.
I do not teach being a *housewife* in my classes—I teach the youngsters how to read our language.
The gift is still in its beautiful, gorgeous, yellow-and-black wrapping paper.
I have set it down on the lowest of my shelves, beside another gift from a youngster two cycles of the three suns earlier. It is wrapped in green-and-red tape.
These are Christmas colours.
Considering how much I shake in my boots for gift-receiving, I am supposing that I will absolutely love Christmas. Snowflakes on my eyelashes. When I have those.
It is claustrophobic underground.
I sneak off during mealtime, often, to study the very few books in the universal-access library that are about windows, doors, chimneys, and flaps in the lower quadrant of doors that are very specific for little creatures, but not of the wild kind.
Wouldn't you love to picture yourself sitting by a bay window, admiring the world beyond?

Wihja

How important is all this, for science and research, I ask.
It is my routine observation. They will ponder over every orifice of my body.
I must be healthy and my womb must no longer be fertile, for I have had children enough for
the future of our species. I get a thank-you and a warm hug for my contributions.
Today they are requesting that a large quantity of the liquid inside my body be extracted out and
kept safe and secure.
I am untrusting of new procedures. A warm hand is trying to reassure me.
I am so untrusting of the future for my children.
While I had waited for my appointment, I could not cease picturing them early in their graves,
and because of what came before them. History.
There is a saying in our language that I utter to myself when I first step out of the house in the
waking hours: *laxa ev mo-mel laxa, syncree dom*.
It means: the end will be the end when syncree feast.
Syncree are a micro-organism that exist within our bodies, but are stabilised by our
environment.
I see yellowed corpses of my children, and I do wonder, is it the true solution to abandon our
home planet to the toxicity above?

Elliott

This must be how other people feel. Unbothered.
I never wear clothes anymore—the world must be alarmed I am always strikingly nude, but what is a body for if not to flaunt it to everyone?
People have called the police on me several times.
The attendant at the sex toy shop shrieked when I proffered I would be ringing up a large purchase of lubes, dildos, vibrators, ball gags, leashes, and butt plugs.
(I plan to use them with Jon, but do not tell him yet, it will be a surprise this evening)
Once, when I was arrested for public indecency, I collapsed down onto the cool concrete of the cell wrapped only in a woolly blanket, and I prayed.
Not to God, mind you, but to a gigantic pyramid-shaped being that has ascended from Hell and now frequently visits me by perching on my windowsill and sips coffee out of a mug shaped like Santa Claus.
Praying did not achieve much.
I am like an oversized baby with an enlarged fetish for sexual activity.
I want to believe Jon still loves me.
I am convinced he is fooling around with other men.
And women. And tissue boxes and the waterbed in the rear bedroom.
I wake myself up in the middle of the night and stand in the middle of the train tracks that are behind our apartment and wait for something to collide into me.
I am not convinced it would kill me.

Jon

I wonder how Tyler would have reacted if I had told him I had indeed eaten his tuna sandwich the last four days, and that I did not regret it one bit.

Tyler is a coworker of mine. He has a tooth ache.

It makes for a funny sort of story, to go home after an exhausting workday and set the table for dinner and tell your partner, Tyler could not believe his sandwich was missing for yet another day! Even after he had labelled it extra clearly that it was his sandwich!

When I am chewing through a gristly slab of steak that my partner has not prepared properly, because he will not let anyone else cook the steak but him, I think:

Hi my name is Jon.

I want to start seeing a therapist.

I am worried that I am beginning to forget who I am.

When I am standing on train platforms, waiting to embark on the journey home, proper, I am listening to a podcast I downloaded the night before, and the host tells me a fascinating story about how Colin Farrell prepared for his role in *The Banshees of Inisherin*.

I really, really want to see a donkey in real life.

Before I forget what a donkey even is.

Nicole

Wouldn't you love to picture yourself sitting by a bay...

I live in the city now, in a basement apartment.

At least I had a few windows, but sometimes all I am able to see are the rats marching on the sidewalk, scurrying around in search for something to eat. I'm sure.

The first thing I did when I moved into this apartment is searched for a roommate.

I had never lived with one before; I had only ever lived with my parents, when I was a small thing. I could already imagine, then, the two of us sitting at the breakfast bar, talking about how we wished to vacation off to some inlet somewhere and watch the dolphins swim up to the shore with their snouts to the air, click-clacking in their tongue, asking for food.

There are so many things that I do regret: a nipple piercing, not making sure the nipple piercing was kept clean, missing a flight because I did not set a sentient alarm that would scream at me when I ignored the alarm to sleep more, and drinking wine.

It is supposed to say, *too much wine*.

It's when I drink too much of this wine that I realise I am so desperate to have a child that I have even considered breaking into a hospital one evening and stealing one of the newborns to keep for myself. When you see filmed footage of hospitals, there is always such an abundance of sweet, silent newborns...it is a beautiful sign of the life in the world, and the parents that are indeed willing to raise them.

Would you agree far better than I ever could?

Teaching is such a noble profession. You can win awards for it, you know?

Marian

It is the true solution to abandon our home planet to the toxicity above.
I am sitting in on a lecture series about the possibility of establishing a colony on Mars, and I chuckle to myself. What is so awful about Earth that we refuse to rehabilitate it?
I have a part-time job at the supermarket and I secretly stash as many packets of cigarettes as possible and set them ablaze in the carpark after my shift.
I am engulfed in flame and I am liberated.
I am not literally engulfed in flame. Although having children is all the same.
Two of my children are renting out an apartment of their own, and I sobbed for hours on end.
I am killing these trees for the tissues and I do not even care!
No one understands how a single mother can raise her nine children.
Well, one of them has died.
In fantastical dreams I could never have imagined myself having, I see her face again.
There is nothing more empowered for me than tracing the lines of the future in the slight creases of a child's precious face. Not even eating an impressively-delicious cheeseburger.
I am not a religious person, but I am grateful to the above.
To space.
I raise my glass of cigarette-ash.